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Feminist phenomenology and the changing running body: the pleasure/danger nexus

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To consider



- Why (sociological) feminist phenomenology?
- Autophenomenography / autoethnography of female distance running
- Sensing pleasure & danger: changing perceptions / changing corporeal awareness

Why (sociological & feminist) phenomenology of embodiment?




- The sociology of the body [including the sporting body]:
- ...is characterised by an abundance of theorising, but a systematic empirical research tradition is lacking... Research on the body has been chastised for privileging theorizing, of bracketing out the individual, and for ignoring the practical experiences of embodiment... (Wainwright and Turner, 2006: 238)

Like the reader who overlooks the physical inscriptions on the page before them in order to follow the meaning embodied in those inscriptions, sociologists have overlooked the embodiment of agents and actions in order to better get at the meanings, purposes, interests, rules etc, embodied by them (Crossley, 2007: 84)

Woman in the sporting body

- Female sporting body studied in myriad ways
- Relative lacuna re engagement with 'flesh' of sweating, breathing, lived female sporting body (Allen-Collinson 2011)
- Corporeally-grounded perspective needed - enrich sociological understandings; c.f. Nick Crossley's 'carnal sociology'
- Sociological, feminist phenomenological framework provides powerful lens – synthesis of existential phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh-of-the-world') with social-structural sociological lens
- Shifting interplay - structure & agency experienced in lived sporting body
- Today - nexus of pleasure & danger as corporeally experienced whilst running in 'public' space as a running-woman

Autophenomenography




- Analogous to autoethnography but
- Autoethnographic focus is on *ethnós* (social group sharing a common (sub)culture) or cultural 'place'; researcher *qua* member of this social group
- Autophenomenography* too is autobiographical genre but focus is on a particular **phenomenon** or **phenomena** as experienced by researcher
- Use of epochē – or best efforts (only ever partial)

*See Allen-Collinson, J (2011 a) Intention and epochē in tension: autophenomenography, bracketing and a novel approach to researching sporting embodiment, *Qualitative Research in Sport & Exercise*, 3 (1): 48-62.

Research project on female distance running

- 3-year autoethnographic & autophenomenographic project
- Data revealed nexus of structure/agency in lived sporting body
- Constraints of social structure and potentials of female agency coalesce powerfully in lived experiences of running in 'public' places
- Simone de Beauvoir (1972) signalled empowering force of outdoor recreation for women - she exhorted to battle against the elements, take risks, & seek adventure
- Feminist phenomenology seeks to 'capture' something of these moments (sometimes transient/sometimes protracted duration): tensions & paradoxes
- Here, I focus on exploring the experience of change via combined lenses:
- Corporeal (often tiny nuances) – **phenomenology**
- Social context – **feminist phenomenology**



Sensing corporeal change: work-body — running-body

- Nearly 3 weeks' solid of marking. Legs and arms heavy from it, neck and shoulders rigid, strained, taut to breaking. Eyes red and gritty. It's going to be a hard run tonight, I guess. But just a few minutes into my stride and the navy-dusk wind is cutting away the work smog, sloughing off the grey skin of the working day. I am being cleansed. / am back. I am back in-body after yet another day of attempted body denial, and enforced focus on the headwork. Quads surge forwards, muscles strong and bulking, pushing against tracksters, abs tighten and flatten against the chill wind as I begin to up the pace...

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Extero-ception / proprioception - temperature changes

- As I set off in the last rays of April sunshine, down the hill towards the playing fields and river, dark, lowering cloud obscures the hills on the other side of the valley. It looks as though it's going to pour down or snow heavily. Sure enough the temperature is dropping rapidly and an icy wind's edge chills my skin, which chafes against thin cotton tee shirt. Shall I head home for warmer gear now, is there time??... No, but best divert away from the open fields and head towards the scant cover of early spring trees.
- As I continue, the thin wind is bitter against my slight body, but as my core begins to warm to the labour, a strange sensation comes over me. Like Baked Alaska in reverse: my wind-chilled outer skin is bitterly cold, grey-blue, but it seems as though just a few layers beneath the epidermis, my inner body is glow-warm orange. The strangeness of the feeling preoccupies me so that the discomfort of the cold is forgotten for a while and I can concentrate on a steady even pace.



Sensing dangers...



- Decided to take the bracken route down the moor to the track, but as I enter the head-height, dense bracken, I feel hemmed in, trapped – I can't see what's around the corner, who might be lurking at the path sides. My breath catches, holds, ears straining for any sound, goose pimples catch the moor breeze, trying to quieten my heart beat so that I can hear... probably just sheep... I have to walk some of the way, the path is too steep, too friable for running, but I'm light and primed for flight as any moorland creature... Hit the open space with relief.

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Out along the river meadows quite some way from the city and approaching the weir. Suddenly out of the blue, a red pick-up truck is hurtling its way across the field towards me ... I had spotted the truck previously careering across the fields, but within sight and earshot of dog-walkers and others... Now there is no one in sight, and the houses bordering the river are some way off on the other bank. Is that a shot gun sticking out of the open passenger window *[it is a rural, farming area where guns are quite common]*? I catch male voices drifting toward me on the evening air.

- Heart pounding in my ears now... Try to steady breathing, better to concentrate. The truck is still approaching down the grassy track, bumping and swaying. I up the pace, pull down my baseball hat firmly and set my jaw sternly. I will my body harder, leaner, tauter, try to look focussed and 'don't mess with me'. Not for the first time, I wish my slight, 5'3" runner's body were somewhat more imposing. Suddenly breath-catchingly, the truck veers off the track a few metres in front of me. I hear loud male voices and a radio blaring. Heart still pounding out time. Just in case, I up the pace to get out of the danger zone...



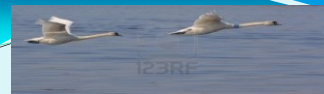
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And Pleasures...

- One of those 'in the moment' runs tonight. Glorious sunset down by the river, great rhythm, my strides just eat up the ground. Whole sections of the route have gone missing (recalls an earlier fieldnote from a different place, a different time) as John Bonham's great tree trunk sticks beat out the rhythm. Machine-gun the pace. Perfect rhythm, perfect timing. Flow. Breathing and beat in synchronicity. As aquamarine finale of sunset darkens to indigo, as the dying riffs fade away, I walk the last few steps down the path to my front door. Fade out. Synchronicity.



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- Down past the parkland areas and playing fields, away and heading out along the riverside... the long shadows are beginning to creep towards me, but the sun still catches my upper limbs to impart golden evening warmth. Now, suddenly the air behind me thickens and throbs. Then, with the muscular beat of powerful white wings and mewling constantly to each other, two great swans sink heavily downwards towards the river. Slowly, I look over to my left to watch my companions, necks outstretched, huge wings almost too slow to hold their bodies in midflight as they draw down alongside me at head height to follow the river. Heart and wingbeats synchronise as we three run-fly together along the glistening river. For a wonderful, foolish, glorious moment, I feel flying...

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Why feminist/socio phenomenology?



- Phenomenology provides complex & holistic view of human experience, encouraging understanding of what it means to be the woman/person in the body – the lived body of everyday life
- Epoché / bracketing encourage fundamental questioning of tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions & pre-suppositions re the everyday – *n.b.* epoché can only ever be partial
- Develops understanding from 'insider' perspective – without undue imposition of researcher's *weltanschauung* /worldview
- As a sociologist, limitations of philosophical phenomenology include its universalisation thesis, lived experience as that of 'everywoman'/'everyman' (see Allen-Collinson, 2011b, for critique)
- So feminist / sociological phenomenology (also queer pheno), acknowledges impact/constraints of historical, structural, ideological, socio-cultural location upon lived-body experience
- Acknowledges specificities of lived-body experience – gender, age, ethnicity, class, degrees of dis/ability, and so on...

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